

Crossword Puzzles: One Way to Improve Communication Strategies

By Glenn Wharton

L2 learners continually find themselves in situations for which they lack the vocabulary to express certain desires or needs. In such cases, learners employ communication strategies like paraphrasing in order to negotiate a shared meaning. I use the term "communication strategies" to refer to those strategies that a speaker employs in conversation to compensate for missing knowledge (Tarone 1983). Some researchers (Ellis 1985) prefer the term "compensatory strategies" whereas others (Oxford 1990) substitute the term "compensation strategies."

Whether or not to Teach Communication Strategies

Paraphrasing is not something unique to second-language learning. It occurs in one's native language, as when a typical customer attempts to explain to a mechanic what is wrong with his car but lacks the technical vocabulary to do so, or when parents and teachers explain complex concepts to children. Many researchers in second-language acquisition (Cook 1991; Bialystok 1990) do not believe that L2 learners need to be specifically taught how to use communication strategies since they already use them in their L1. According to Kellermann and his colleagues (1990), the strategies which involve substituting one word for another form part of every speaker's communicative competence and are applicable to other languages. On the other hand, some L2 researchers (e.g., Oxford 1990; O'Malley and Chamot 1990) argue that training students in the use of communication strategies-and learning strategies in general-helps them become better language learners. Whatever one's opinion on the teaching of strategies, few could question the benefits derived from reminding L2 learners that such strategies are at their disposal (i.e., consciousness-raising) and providing the students with opportunities to use these strategies.

A Rationale for Using Crossword Puzzles

One means of providing students with practice in the use of paraphrasing strategies is incorporating crossword puzzles into a communicative activity. With today's

emphasis on the importance of using communicative pairwork activities in the language classroom, L2 learners experience a greater need for communication/compensatory strategies to plug the gaps that exist not only in their own vocabulary and grammar but also in that of their L2 classroom interlocutors.

It's something (that) you use{ to + V

for + V+ing

It's something (that) you see{ if + you + V

when you + V

It's something (that) you do{ if you + V

when you + V

It's a place where . . .

It's someone who . . .

It looks like . . .

Warm-up Activities

Prior to giving the students a crossword puzzle, it is a good idea to run through some of the language typically used in circumlocution. For example, as a warm-up to the main task, the teacher could model an answer by defining an object or an action and then urge the class to ask him/her more questions to narrow down the range of possibilities. The students could practice further in pairs until the teacher feels comfortable that they are adept in using these expressions. Once this stage is reached, the students are ready for the puzzle itself.

Instructions for the Main Task

The answers for the following crossword puzzles are words that were familiar to the students in a particular class; i.e., they had seen and/or heard them in previous lessons. As can be seen in the diagram, each pair of students has the puzzle, one with part A containing half the solutions, and the other with part B containing the rest. It is advisable to write the instructions for the activity on each handout since students may forget or not understand the teacher's oral instructions. In addition, before handing out the puzzle, explain to the students that the goal is to complete it in pairs *without* looking at their partner's copy. Stress the importance of giving one's partner feedback on the initial definition by asking more questions to allow the students to narrow the possibilities and negotiate meaning.

In case the students are unfamiliar with or have simply forgotten some of the words, give each pair a dictionary, written for EFL/ESL learners. But, make sure they use it sparingly, since some may simply decide to read out the dictionary definition verbatim rather than put it in their own words.

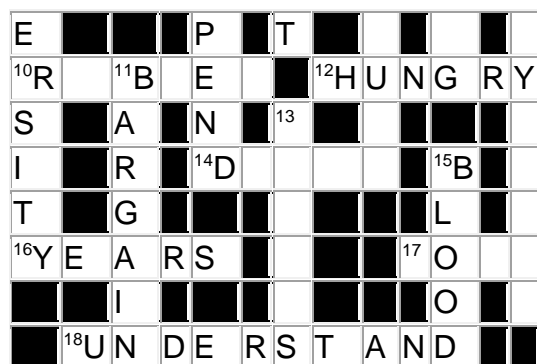
While students are working in pairs on the main task, the teacher can circulate, acting as a facilitator when needed, noting down recurrent language problems that can be cleared up later on the board or OHP as a follow-up activity with the whole class.

Part A. You have a crossword puzzle with only half of the solutions. Your partner has the other half. When your partner asks for help with missing words (e.g.: "What's 6 across?"), help him/her by giving clues for your words.



Part B. You have a crossword puzzle with only half of the solutions. Your partner has the other half. When your partner asks for help with missing words (e.g.: "What's 4 down?"), help him/her by giving clues for your words.





How to Make Crossword Puzzles

Crossword puzzles for use in the language classroom are really quite easy to create. First, make a list of words with which your students should be familiar. This is a good way to recycle vocabulary so that learners get used to seeing and hearing it. Then search for a letter common to two words and you're off! It's surprising just how quickly a pattern resembling a crossword puzzle emerges, very much like in the word game "Scrabble." (Sophisticated crossword puzzles of newspapers are not your goal). Once you have enough words in the crossword pattern on your draft, copy half the solutions.

Conclusion

Many EFL teachers support the theory behind the communicative approach to language teaching but bemoan the lack of techniques with which to implement this approach. I have described an activity which not only provides opportunities for meaningful communication between classroom L2 learners but is also-in the opinion of my students-a lot of fun. Crossword puzzles are useful for learning and/or reinforcing vocabulary and, in addition, provide a means for helping students to improve their communication strategies.

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